



Only From the Dark

I am one of those people who are keyed to daylight. My husband says that he can see the sadness grow in me when we have a few cloudy days in a row. He's probably right. I know that if I'm feeling down, especially in winter, there is no better treatment than to get myself outside and turn my eyes towards whatever sunshine is available, even if that means bundling up in every warm piece of clothing I own. There have even been times when this guy will shovel a spot clean under one of the big spruce trees, and set up a lawn chair where I might wrap myself in a blanket to stare at the sun. Don't laugh until you have tried this yourself!

Not only can it be depressing that we have so few hours of daylight during winter in the northland, but it is downright inconvenient. We go to work in the dark; we come back home in the dark. Our shortest winter day involves about 8 1/2 hours of daylight. That means there is a heck of a lot of hours of darkness. It's hard to get a lot of things done outside when it is dark.

But have you noticed the beauty that comes with that darkness? Lately I have been noticing the rising and the setting of the moon, both of which sometimes occur on my drive to and from work. The moon has been huge, and there is something about its ascent over the winter landscape that is difficult to resist.

Farm chores are one of the things I do in the evening after work at my home on the Chippewa National Forest. I like keeping sheep, so I still maintain a small flock. During lambing season, I lock all of the ewes in the barn every night, so that no little ones are born out in the cold. Our winter being long and weather uncertain, we can have winter storms well into April and fresh lambs are very susceptible to the elements. Checking the flock at night is important even with a barn, to make sure that newborns are promptly cared for by their mothers, or they can die of hypothermia by morning.

Night checks are important, but can be wearing on the shepherd. You leave your warm bed and drag out into the cold and dark to the barn to an uncertain amount of work. Over the years, I have found that one of the fringe benefits is the chance to admire the night sky. When it is darkest out,

is when you will see an amazing number and density of stars in the sky. That very same sky you saw earlier in the day takes on a whole different character in the deep of the night.

From time to time, we have gone for a snowmobile ride at night. It can be a challenge in the darkness, even with the powerful headlights of today's snowmobiles, and if something goes wrong it can become a bad deal, indeed. But the sky is totally amazing when you ride sleds in the dark. The brilliance of the stars is truly remarkable. To see the night sky is one of the great gifts of spending time on the Chippewa.

When our girls were young, camping was one of our favorite family activities. My partner viewed evening time as the perfect time to fish from the boat. But for me, the draw of the campfire was stronger. As a special treat for the kids, I would let them stay up past bed time by the fire and watch for the stars. No television show or electronic device could be more alluring than that.

It seems kind of funny to say it, but you can only see these sights when it is truly dark out. By that I mean that not only must it be night time, but also that you cannot be surrounded by artificial light. Being able to light up our world is one of the most obvious aspects of modern civilization, apparent even from outer space. This skill allows us to do so many things. We can extend our waking hours, allowing us a measure of control over our environment. We can travel in relative safety, eat a late meal, sit with a child while they do their homework, and even work through the night.

We count so much on using light to see in the dark, that many of us fail to notice the things that we can no longer see and that have slipped from our daily lives. It doesn't take much of a town to lose sight of the stars due to interference of the lights. It's estimated that the unaided human eye can normally detect about 2,500 individual stars. This drops to 200 – 300 in the suburbs, and less than a dozen in a typical city.

One of my husband's worries as our girls headed down to school in the Twin Cities was that they would not see the stars. I told him that it might not be forever, and at least they know what the night sky looks like, and how to find it again. It should be obvious, but I suspect for many people it really is not. For most folks, our way of life causes us to lose our connection with the night sky. It is estimated that only 1 in 3 Americans can see our galaxy, the Milky Way, with the naked eye. Because the truth of the matter is that although you might catch the rise and fall of the moon when it's light out, the wonder of the stars is something you can see only from the dark. Darkness is vanishing in our modern world, but you can still find it over your public lands.

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